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ABSTRACT

Rural schools are having difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers. The national teacher turnover rate is 6% annually, but in rural areas reaches 30% to 50%. Rural teachers often leave due to social, cultural, geographic, and professional isolation. They are often unprepared for rural realities that demand knowledge in multiple subjects and know-how, in conducting a range of school activities. Few universities offer preservice programs that prepare teachers for rural jobs. Recruiting teachers for rural settings requires effective recruitment strategies targeting persons with a rural background. Realistic marketing is the key in this effort, and it would stress the real benefit in teaching in rural schools, such as few discipline problems, less red tape, more personal contact, and greater chance for leadership. Retaining rural teachers requires the coordinated effort of the school and the community. The community can recognize the new teachers' accomplishments and invite them to participate in various activities. The school can ease the new teachers' transition by: (1) assigning a mentor; (2) streamlining paperwork; (3) providing a well-planned inservice program; and (4) arranging released time for visiting other teachers' classrooms. Universities need to prepare teachers for service in rural areas and need to develop cost-effective distance learning courses to keep rural teachers current and up to date. This paper includes 18 references. (ALL)

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Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools

Deanne Stone

Rural school administrators are in a perpetual search for new teachers. Nationwide, the teacher turnover rate is six percent annually, but in rural areas that figure swells to a frustrating and demoralizing 30-50 percent. Rural teacher recruitment is difficult even in normal circumstances. Under the current teacher shortage, some administrators, especially in the least desirable rural locales, are finding it nearly impossible. Instead of hiring the best person for the job, the risk is that they'll settle for anyone willing to apply.

Why Teachers Leave

The most common reason rural teachers leave is isolation—social, cultural, geographic, and professional. On a personal level, young single teachers bemoan the lack of a social life; those who don't marry rarely stay much longer than a year. New teachers often feel that their lives are too closely scrutinized, particularly if their values, lifestyles, or cultural backgrounds differ from community norms.

But the small school's heavy demands can also defeat teachers. Often unprepared for rural realities and lacking instructional materials, novices are expected to teach multiple subjects in multigraded classrooms, diagnose and prescribe lessons for students with special needs, and lead a range of extracurricular activities. In many cases they must do so with limited supplies and little, if any, administrative support.

The Burden on Administrators

Administrators already taxed by the everyday problems of running a rural school district must simultaneously serve as full-time recruiters. They have little financial leeway, since rural districts already spend a high percentage of local resources on education. And they are competing against urban and suburban districts that may have full-time recruiting staffs, slick promotional materials, and enticing benefits packages. What they're looking for are teachers able to teach multiple subjects at four or five grade levels. Such generalists are already hard to find, and changing certification requirements may further shrink the supply. Rural schools also need teachers with knowledge of computer science and advanced math to equip students with skills for today's job market.

Scarcity of Rural-Focused Preservice

Few education departments, even in universities located in rural states, offer preservice programs for rural teachers. A 1985 survey of 306 college and university departments of education across the country showed that more than 70 percent of those institutions provided neither special topics nor courses to prepare teachers for a rural setting. Only nine institutions offered courses devoted solely to the study of small or rural schools. Not surprisingly, first-year teachers complain of being unprepared for the realities of rural schools.

While most educators agree that departments of education should provide training for rural teachers, they have had little incentive to develop courses. To maintain their accreditation, colleges and universities must comply with legal and professional requirements. But these standards are being set by federal and state legislators focused on the many big city schools in shambles. As a consequence, the needs of metropolitan areas are driving requirements for all school districts, with potentially dire consequences for rural schools.

A case in point is the current push from school reformers to abolish the undergraduate education major and to certify teachers only in academic subjects they major in and can demonstrate teaching competence. Such a move, supported by the prestigious Carnegie Commission and the 1986 Holmes Group report, makes sense from the perspective of enhancing specific

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subject matter knowledge. But because it would make it extremely difficult for teachers to earn more than one subject certificate in four years, the kinds of generalists sorely needed in rural areas would be in even shorter supply.

Recruiting Strategies

Pitfalls of the Hard Sell. With some 9,500 rural school districts competing for the same small pool of teachers, rural administrators have been forced to adopt sophisticated marketing strategies to attract teachers. The days of posting job announcements each spring are over; recruiting is now a year-round effort requiring personal contacts with college and university education departments both in and out of state.

To meet the challenge, rural administrators are advised by some of their cohorts to aggressively market their districts to prospective teachers. Suggestions include administrators' turning on the charm in initial interviews, developing attractive recruitment packages and promotional materials extolling the special features of their area, using local people as community cheerleaders, and even hiring professional "head hunters."

Since rural school districts generally cannot afford salaries equal to those paid in large urban districts, they are encouraged to sweeten their offers with other incentives. Some suggested benefits are covering teachers' interviewing and moving expenses, reimbursing tuition for professional courses and conferences, and assisting with housing by subsidizing rent, providing housing, or even building a "teacherage" adjacent to the school. Schools in economically depressed areas are at a decided disadvantage in this competition unless they receive special state funds for teachers' salaries and benefits.

Marty Carlin is a teacher and consultant in Trinity County, a geographically large but sparsely populated logging and tourist area in Northern California. Carlin grew up in Brooklyn and taught history in a New York junior high school. In the early 1970s, he moved to Wyoming to pursue his passion for skiing. Twelve years later, he and his wife moved to Trinity County where she was hired to teach primary grades in a two-room school. When the other teacher quit, Carlin hesitantly took over grades four through eight.

Despite his previous teaching experience, Carlin felt like a rookie. Preparing for multiple subjects and grade levels left him no time to confer with administrators or teachers from neighboring districts, so he learned on his own. "The rural school system is not designed for collegial contacts." He did have one advantage, however. While teaching history to gifted students in New York, he found that adapting to their needs meant abandoning sequential texts and seat work in favor of primary sources and cooperative groups. That experience, he says, equipped him with the flexibility and open attitude needed for rural teaching.

Carlin's energy and bent toward innovation quickly led to action. Feeling hampered by the narrow scope of materials available in district libraries, he wrote a proposal (using 150 hours of his own time) that won a state pilot project grant allowing 10 Trinity County schools to buy computers and laser disk players. His two-room schoolhouse now has 15 computers for its 30 students, allowing access to the huge range of information available on data bases. No longer a classroom teacher, Carlin has become program trainer and coordinator for all 10 schools. He spent last year helping teachers become comfortable with computers; this year he'll do the same for students.

Since becoming a consultant, Carlin has helped his wife—now the school principal—interview prospective teachers. He has learned to be wary of candidates with romantic notions about country teaching. Particularly if they are dependent on traditional textbooks and lesson plans, he says, they are likely to be scared off by the multiple demands. Instead he looks for problem-solvers who relish a challenge. Ideal candidates are also familiar with computer technology and strategies for integrating it into rural education. And since rural teaching can overwhelm novices, he considers previous teaching experience a definite plus.

Carlin is well aware that a switch from urban to rural life can be a major adjustment. Typically, a spouse has difficulty finding work. In Trinity, a relatively poor district, the Carlins' dual income arouses some resentment among neighbors who have trouble making ends meet. After seven years here, the Carlins have good relations with people in the community, but their closest friends live elsewhere. And this year, in a move geared toward more intellectual stimulation, Carlin will divide his schedule between consulting in Trinity County and teaching in a San Francisco area college.

Some desperate administrators may be tempted to sell prospective teachers a bill of goods about their schools and communities. Misleading information or exaggerated promises may lure teachers to a district but will not keep them, and administrators will have to begin the expensive, time-consuming recruitment process all over again.

Realistic Marketing. A more effective marketing strategy begins with targeting a receptive audience of teachers. Because social factors are so crucial in retaining teachers, persons who grew up in or have lived in rural areas are most likely to identify with and accept rural culture and values. Administrators' best bets are recruiting teachers from colleges which draw from rural areas, or offering promising students and local people interested in teaching careers college scholarships in exchange for a commitment to teach in the district for an agreed upon number of years.

Perhaps more important than rural background or academic achievement are certain personality traits. The profile of the ideal rural teacher would be a generalist who is flexible, energetic, resourceful, self-reliant, and committed to staying in the school district for at least five years.

When interviewing prospective teachers, administrators need to stress the real benefits of teaching in rural schools, small class size, few discipline problems, less red tape, more personal contact with students and their families, more opportunities for leadership—and the attractions of their region, geography, history, climate, sports, without overlooking the disadvantages. An honest discussion of the mores and values of the community and its drawbacks can weed out teachers who may have unrealistic notions of rural life.

Once teachers express interest in joining the faculty, administrators should arrange for them (and, if they are married, their spouses and children) to visit overnight or for a weekend with a host family. Getting acquainted with the people, organizations, and recreational activities in the area is the best way for teachers to assess whether they fit in with the community.

Retention Strategies

Recruiting is only part of the battle; the real challenge is retaining teachers. From the moment new teachers are hired, the school and the local people have to begin a coordinated effort to make them feel welcome.

The Community's Role. Because teachers are watched so closely by the local people, some teachers prefer to keep a friendly distance. But for those desiring more involvement, the community can extend an open hand by inviting them to dinner and including them in club and church activities. The community can also help by supporting new teachers and recognizing their accomplishments.

What the School District Can Do. Assigning an experienced teacher as a "buddy" or mentor is one of the best ways to acclimate new teachers to a district. The buddy functions both as an initial guide and a resource person throughout the first semester. District administrators can also ease new teachers' transition by stopping by regularly in the first few months to see how they are getting along.

Lack of contact with and support from administrators is a major complaint of rural teachers. Preparing for multiple subjects and grades leaves them little free time for developing new units. Administrators can reduce teachers' loads by periodically relieving teachers in the classroom. They can also win teachers' good will by taking steps to streamline paperwork requirements, and, when necessary, offering secretarial assistance when teachers are overburdened.

A key to retaining rural teachers is providing opportunities for professional growth. Well-planned inservice trainings offer intellectual stimulation, motivation, and, equally important, a chance to socialize with peers. One-shot workshops, however, have little value. Without sufficient follow-up, reinforcement, and a little hand-holding, teachers are unlikely to integrate new ideas and methods.

Professionally run workshops are excellent vehicles for introducing new educational theories and methods, but nothing substitutes for teacher exchanges. Rural teachers, in particular, look forward to meetings with colleagues in their districts to share tips and strategies for dealing with common problems. Even more helpful is watching skillful teachers in action in their classrooms. By arranging release time, administrators can set up a rotating system that allows teachers to visit one another's classrooms.

Opportunities abound for neighboring districts to collaborate. By pooling funds, they can share the expenses of inviting outside experts to address their teachers, or of hiring itinerant master teachers and specialists. Rural districts can also combine forces to lobby their state legislatures for additional funds to increase salaries or upgrade facilities and equipment. Poor districts and those with low teacher-student ratios have little clout, but several districts acting together have a better chance of being heard.

Creating an environment that makes teachers want to stay requires administrators willing to go beyond the routine call of duty; the alternative is recruiting and training new teachers every year.

The University's Responsibility

Critics charge that recruiting and retaining teachers will remain critical problems until the universities assume more responsibility for training administrators and teachers. Given the diversity of teaching situations, generic academic classes can hardly prepare teachers for every setting. Although much learning can only happen on the job, departments of education can diminish the frustrations rural teachers encounter in the first year by designing courses and projects for a rural context.

Some universities have made a good start toward expanding programs and services to rural districts. Their multipronged attack includes: conducting research to assess rural concerns, training faculty as specialists in rural education, developing specific education and sociology courses that address rural issues, using professors and graduate students to provide technical assistance to rural schools, and creating off-campus training centers.

One simple change in preservice training that's bringing good results is the requirement by many rural colleges and universities that student teachers live for a month or semester in the communities where they teach. This "total immersion" approach is effective in disabusing students of any idealized notions of rural life as well as convincing them of its benefits. A high percentage of participating students choose to teach in rural schools, and many are hired by the schools in which they trained.

New technology—computers, radio and television satellites, and interactive video—offers exciting possibilities for inservice training. Though ongoing staff development is beyond the budget of most rural districts, universities have the talent and access to funding sources to develop quality courses and teleconferences that can be adapted to the needs of rural and urban schools. Besides being more cost-effective, distance learning ensures that rural teachers in even the most remote regions receive staff training based on the latest research available.

Five years ago, Mike Tremayne and his wife, both teachers, moved to Austin, Nevada, a mining town of 400 people in the high mountain desert. Lander County had a lot to offer the Tremaynes: salaries almost double what they earned in Idaho, a paid pension plan, no state taxes, a new high school facility, small classes, and outdoor recreation. But all those incentives would not have persuaded the Tremaynes to sign up if Mike's brother, also a teacher, and his family did not live near by.

Until a few years ago, Lander County's faculty turned over every two years. The district solved the problem by improving its compensation package and recruiting married teachers. The current faculty, seven teachers, is a close-knit group. They and their families regularly socialize and help each other by picking up supplies for one another in Fallon, some 110 miles away. But the neighborliness does not completely compensate for the isolation. While the Tremaynes chose Lander County as a wonderful place to raise their two young children, they worry that small town life is not adequate preparation for coping with the real world. When their children become teenagers, the Tremaynes plan to move to a larger city.

Utah is an example of a rural state that has benefitted from innovative programs developed in its colleges and universities. In the early 1970s, Brigham Young University, a leader in rural education, created a model of field-based training centers that has been copied by other universities training rural teachers. Built in areas more than 10 miles from campus and staffed by BYU professors, the centers provide training manuals and instructional materials for teachers as well as preservice and inservice training and courses for credit. The university also sponsors faculty exchanges in which student teachers fill in for a week in rural classrooms allowing teachers to attend intensive workshops on the BYU campus.

Field-based classes offered by South Utah State College allowed Deanna Burton to complete her education degree after she was married and had children. Instead of commuting 125 miles to the college, Burton was able to attend classes in her hometown. A third-grade teacher in Millard County, the third largest in Utah, Burton has participated in inservice training on a range of subjects, including analysis of teaching styles, reality therapy, and outcome-based models of developing lesson plans.

Burton says her school district has come a long way since she started teaching eight years ago. Salaries are among the highest for rural areas, and this year the district declared a limit of 24 students per class. Collaboration is encouraged between administrators and teachers (Burton serves on the long-range district planning team) and the environment puts student needs first. Not surprisingly, Millard County has low teacher turnover. The district has not solved all its problems. Burton would like to see more inservice workshops on managing discipline problems, for

instance, and more counselors (the district has only one). But it is an encouraging example of a rural district increasingly responsive to the needs of its teachers and students and using resources available to improve the quality of education.

Summary

The problem of recruiting and retaining rural teachers has reached near-crisis proportions in many communities. With some notable exceptions, college and university departments of education, even in primarily rural states, have been slow to acknowledge the special needs of rural schools. In areas where universities have taken the lead in developing preservice and inservice training programs, rural education has progressed. The economic, geographic, and cultural diversity of rural America means an imbalance of services and facilities. Predictably, poor districts and those in undesirable locations and extreme climates suffer the greatest neglect. To change this, legislators must be persuaded to provide special funds to the least-favored rural districts to help them attract qualified teachers, and universities must become actively engaged in research leading to the development and delivery of preservice and inservice programs tailored to rural schools. Without these efforts, a majority of rural students may enter the 21st century lacking the basic information and skills for survival.

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